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The Morality of the Old Testament

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HELPS TO BELIEF.



THE
MORALITY OF THE OLD TESTAMENT.

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THE
MORALITY OF THE OLD TESTAMENT.

BY
NEWMAN SMYTH,
AUTHOR OF "OLD FAITHS IN NEW LIGHT," "THE REALITY OF
FAITH," ETC.



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THE
MORALITY OF THE OLD TESTAMENT.



CHAPTER I. -

GENERAL PRINCIPLES.

IT is easy to discover moral difficulties in the Old Testament. In its histories deeds are recorded which it is difficult for us to justify ; and from its moral teachings not a few passages might be cited which do not commend themselves wholly to a tender Christian conscience. From such moral difficulties and imperfections an argument is often gathered against the alleged fact of a divine revelation in the religion of Israel. It is tacitly assumed that faulty human characters could not be *chosen to stand as bearers of a divine purpose*

of redemption. It is asked how a holy God could elect for His service, and bless with divine communications, men who would be regarded as blameworthy by our standards of conduct ; and who, in some of their acts, might even be judged guilty of offences against our laws. It is urged that a divine revelation should be free at least from all moral reproach and blemish, even though scientific accuracy may not be expected of it ; and it is said that imperfect commandments, or low standards of human conduct, or defective conceptions of human rights and duties, are not consistent with the idea of a law given by God which is holy, just, and good.

Candid believers who have not grasped the real method of revelation through the Bible, or the Biblical history, are often embarrassed when pressed by unbelievers with these numerous moral difficulties and obscurities of the Old Testament ; and even the elect, in the *anxiety of their faith*, are sometimes so far

deceived as to fall into doubtful ways of excusing the questionable conduct of Old Testament worthies to the hurt of their better Christian consciences. The many laboured justifications of passages of doubtful morality in the Old Testament which have been put forth hardly afford entire satisfaction to those who offer them ; and, on the other hand, the arguments against the Bible which are easily, and often flippantly, derived from its confessed moral difficulties, cease to have any real and rational validity, when the actual method of revelation, in its broad scope, and its necessary temporal limitations, has been once clearly apprehended. Before any satisfactory explanation of the difficult passages of the Old Testament can be given, the method of the Lord in the history of Israel must be studied, and the real processes of the development of the true religion in Israel must be understood. We are not prepared, therefore, to pass judgment upon the offering of Isaac, for example,

or concerning the exterminating wars of Israel, until we have first instituted a much broader inquiry, and gained some clear apprehension of the laws and limitations of the growth of the divine purpose in Israel's history, and surveyed the religion of the Bible as one connected and historic whole.

In so doing we are only seeking to apply to the moral criticism of the Old Testament a general law of criticism which we recognise as a fair rule in our judgments of any work of man's genius. It lies among the common-places of literary criticism, and is an axiom of intelligent judgment in art, that the several parts of a cathedral, or a poem, should be viewed and valued in their relation to the architecture, or the drama, as a whole. The critic must survey the finished work of the architect, the painter, or the poet, from the point at which they beheld their work in their creative thought of it. The one informing, upbuilding *purpose, moreover, should be clearly conceived*

by the critic not only in its own intrinsic worth, but also in its relations to the materials which were to be wrought into the completed structure. Mere detached opinions which may be pronounced upon separated parts of any great work are not criticism; and this is true, whether the work to be comprehended be a human product or a divine creation. One might, for instance, regard a gargoye as a work of art by itself, apart from its place and use as a water-spout, and without thought of the necessity of a water-spout of some kind even in the cathedral idea. It should be viewed, however, not only in its grotesque carvings, but also in its use in the architecture, in its harmony or dissonance, in its proper place, with the whole idea which was to be wrought out from foundation to loftiest arch and spire of the Gothic cathedral. Certainly the idea of the cathedral, and the genius which awoke in the vast aspiration of the Gothic cathedrals, could not be properly

judged and condemned merely by selecting a number of the most fearful gargoyles, and putting photographs of them together in a popular lecture upon the mistakes of cathedral architecture ; yet such is the cheap method of criticism which sometimes passes for argument against the sublime architecture of the law of Moses, and the glorious aspirations of the prophets of Israel.

Accepting and following in this discussion the recognised canons of literary justice, we shall endeavour, first, to conceive of the morality of the Old Testament as one structure or growth, and to learn its method and aim ; then we shall be in a position, secondly, to estimate correctly particular parts, and special passages, of this sacred history and its Biblical record. We may then understand better what Power or Spirit has been Creator and Lawgiver of it all.

Full and adequate knowledge, it is true, of *the idea of the whole* cannot be gained with-

out careful study of the many different parts of the work ; but final criticism of the several details must follow a correct understanding of the structure or organism as a whole. And in order to gain this comprehensive view of the work of God in Israel, we must also keep an eye constantly upon the moral environment of the chosen people in those Old Testament times. We should study their ideas and conduct, as far as possible, in the light of their moral surroundings, or contemporary history. And we should be careful, also, not to overlook the nature, and the difficulties, of the materials which were to be worked up by the divine idea which sought expression and embodiment in the national character of Israel, and which found its final and perfect revelation in Christianity.

1. When we consider the Old Testament morality as a whole, it is at once obvious that it is a religious morality. We cannot at any point divorce the moral life from the

religious beliefs of the people of Israel. Morality and religion are not held apart as distinct things, either in their fundamental law, their common customs, or their sacred literature. Moral precepts and religious ideas are throughout woven together in their history. This fact, however, that the morality of the ancient Hebrews had a prevailing religious tone, does not of itself distinguish it from the morality of other ancient people. We find generally a blending, and often a confusion, of moral and religious elements in the customs and conduct of men in primitive times. The gods and men were workers together for evil as well as for good in the moral life of the early races. Human morality, indeed, suffered much from the mythologies of the gods. It became a part of the difficult task of the later Greek philosophers to save human ethics from polytheistic religions. False ideas of what transpires in the heavens *made the earth more corrupt.* The Greek

4 ethics in Socrates' day had before it the double task and the double difficulty of cleansing both the earth and the heavens. Yet this is a fact of large significance, that in the childhood of mankind morals and religion were not separated and held sharply apart, as though either could exist and continue without the other. The separation of the two is the work of later scepticism and philosophy, and is not the first instinct of human life. The Hebrew morality shared this common characteristic of all primitive morality in its religiousness. Hence we must look further, and go beyond this general fact of its religious tone and colour, to discover its peculiar and distinguishing characteristics. It was not Israel's religiousness, but the kind and authority of the religion of Israel which made the children of Abraham a peculiar people, and which impressed upon their morality its definite and enduring marks. The personal character of Jehovah, as several

recent writers have remarked, gives to the national worship of Israel its historical separateness. The God of Israel was not like the gods of the nations.

2. The religious morality of the Old Testament had a positive and supreme principle in the revealed will and character of God. There were two fatal defects in the moral life even of the more enlightened Gentile nations which foredoomed their national development to ultimate moral fruitlessness and failure, although it bore many a fair promise, and produced single characters of excellent quality and ripeness. On the one hand, their moral thinking lacked an ideal principle, and fell consequently into mere expediency and empiricism, as in Epicureanism ; or in its effort, on the other hand, to lift itself up to an ideal principle, it lost hold on common life, and became a philosophy of virtue for the chosen few, as among the Platonists. A sound and *permanent* moral growth must be an embodi-

ment of the ideal—influences from the skies must enter into its fruits—and it must have also its roots spread abroad through the common ground of human experience. The problem of vital morality is to bring some spiritual principle, some higher law, into positive contact with the habits of the people. The moral history of the Hebrew nation, alone in all antiquity, escaped these opposite and fatal dangers, either of degenerating into a mere worldly prudence, or of withdrawing from common life into an impracticable philosophy for the knowledge only of the few who are wise. Hebrew morality did not make shipwreck of its hope upon either this Scylla or Charybdis of the Gentile moralities. It presents the spectacle of a supreme religious ideal embodied in positive institutions and laws. Religion among the Hebrews issued directly in moral conduct, and the national morality was secured in the eternal sanctions of its religion. A philosophic conception of the

wise man, or a dream of perfect virtue, however charming it may be for the select few who are instructed, will remain a barren power among the people; it will prove inoperative and ineffectual upon human conduct in general, unless it can be brought nigh every man in some positive form as an institution or law of morals. The daily, efficient power of the ideal in the life of the people is the one thing needing to be secured in the virtue of a nation. It is essential to the righteousness of a city or a country that in some way of practical approach the supreme ideals of virtue shall be brought down to the conscience and the life of the people. The highest principles of human conduct must touch the popular heart.

Now the morality of the Old Testament was such an ideal, supreme and transcendent, brought home to a very rude, gross, and unphilosophic people in a positive institute of *religion*. In its earliest national form it was

institutional morality. It was morality which had been given to the people by the word of the Lord from heaven, but which was written down also in definite commandments which regulated the weekly course of their life in the land that the Lord their God had given them. Their moral code had its heavenly origin and its divine sanction in a historical covenant with Jehovah, and a signal deliverance of the nation by the hand of the Lord from the house of bondage. We shall miss the key-note of the whole moral history of Israel, if we fail to observe this constant reference to the historical fact with which the table of the law begins. Upon that wonderful act of Jehovah in the deliverance of His chosen people, as upon a firm and unchallenged fact of their history, all the law and the prophets rest, and the national consciousness of the people is founded. Plainly enough, then, in this morality of the Old Testament we have not to do with some unsubstantial system of

moral ideas, which are floating all in the air above the people. This is no new philosophic speculation for the wise concerning virtue. Neither was the law of Moses a mere induction of precepts of prudential virtue. The Old Testament is not a compendium of moral probabilities and slowly accumulated maxims of wisdom. The Mosaic legislation—the whole Torah of Israel—is a system that had its foundations in a historical revelation, which the people accepted as a word and covenant of Jehovah their God. The law proceeds from a revelation of God in history. The prophets appeal to the acts and the judgments of the Lord. The people are to obey a present God who has not gone on a far journey, who may manifest His displeasure at disobedience, or save His people in righteousness, at any hour and crisis of their affairs. The Righteous and Holy One rules among the nations. That great and awful *day when the Lawgiver* received the tables of

the commandments upon Mount Sinai, while the people waited beneath the clouds and darkness and mighty thunderings of the holy mount, was the day on which the moral life of Israel received the historic form and consciousness which it never lost, and which made it the positive national morality, embodying a supreme law of heaven, which has been throughout all its history its distinctive and peculiar virtue and power. In its historical revelation and character, therefore, as a divine law for human conduct, the morality of the Old Testament has firm and positive grasp of a supreme principle of goodness, and direct, constant contact with a perfect ideal of righteousness, which other moralities of the ancients sadly lacked.

Such embodiment of a supreme principle of morals in the national consciousness of a gross, uncultivated people, involved, necessarily, certain limitations, and temporary accommodations of the divine to the human,

which will not escape our notice. The vital principle of a perfect morality was planted in the soil which was ready for it, and the seed of the higher life must grow under the historical conditions which existed when the divine will became thus the vital power of the chosen root and stock of Israel.

3. It should be observed, next, that this supreme and absolute principle of the morality of the Old Testament was holiness. The ideal to be embodied and followed by the people in their history was nothing less than the conception of holiness ; for the Lord their God was a holy God. The positive embodiment in Israel, or realisation on earth, of this divine holiness which was their religious ideal, was to be sought in the righteousness of the chosen people ; they were to be righteous in all their ways ; righteousness was to be their character as the people chosen by Jehovah their God, who is the Holy One of Israel, the God of *righteousness*, the Lord loving righteousness,

and hating iniquity. They were to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. Thus in the 19th and the 20th chapters of Exodus the starting-point of the whole moral thought of Israel is firmly fixed ; and to this conception of the Lord their God as holy, and this idea of His people as called to be a holy nation, who are to keep His covenants and commandments in righteousness, the prophets of Israel constantly return. They come with the oracle of Jehovah to call back the people, and to turn again the hearts of kings, to this first divine truth and this one higher law of Israel.

The idea of holiness in the Old Testament, it should be observed, was more than a negative idea of separation from all uncleanness. It begins with the negative conception of Jehovah as a God who is separate from the world and its evil, as the gods of the heathen in the popular mythologies had not been kept pure from the passion and sin of this world, but had been often conceived of as immersed

in its sensuousness, and as bound up in its fate. Jehovah is above the earth, never for a moment involved in its history, self-contained and almighty; perfect, and wanting nothing, in His own majesty and holiness. Had the Hebrew idea, however, of God's holiness, stopped with this conception of His separateness from this evil world, and His transcendence—had it only remained a negative idea of God—it would have proved in history to be little, if at all, superior to the ideal good, or God, of the later Platonic philosophers; it would have remained a divine rhetoric for the thought of the illumined few, but would not have come down from the height of its pure transcendence, and dwelt with man as a vitalising and purifying power in the consciousness and life of the people. The Hebrew law had its historical beginning, not in an abstract teaching of some great thinker, but in an actual deliverance of the *people by the hand* of their God; and the law

was held sacred as the spoken word of Jehovah in the deep popular faith, to which, even in times of idolatrous declension, the prophets boldly appealed. Hence, also, the conception of the divine holiness in the mind of Israel became the thought, not simply of the unapproachable purity of God, but also of a peculiarly sacred relation of Jehovah in covenant with His people, any breach of which on their part was condemned as the sin of national adultery. Consequently, the thought of God's holiness was a present, pressing, and awful sense of obligation—their obligation to keep His commandments.

God's holiness, as they thought of Jehovah, who had delivered them from the house of bondage, and given His law from Mount Sinai, was not only God's exaltation above the world—a dwelling of Jehovah, in His own dazzling purity of being, apart from and high above all human corruption and folly—but also the holiness of the Lord, their God was,

in its revelation to lawgiver and prophet, a pure will of God, which had been followed through all the days of creation to its Sabbath's rest, and which was to be done by His people on the earth. The holiness of God had been a presence of God round about His prophet upon the holy mount, causing Moses' face to shine ; and also the Holy One spake unto Moses, His servant, and gave a law of commandments, written upon tables of stone, which they were to keep, and in observing which from generation to generation they were to become a holy people, separate from the heathen, and purified from all uncleanness. We dwell upon this truth because it is a distinctive and vital element in the morality of the Old Testament, that to the chosen people God's holiness was not only an exalted attribute of Jehovah, or the pure nature and essence of divinity, but also a holy will of God, to be done on earth, and a *holy relationship* between Jehovah and His

chosen people. The thought of the holiness of God becomes thus the inspiration of the prophets and poets of a nation, and gives law to its priests and kings. The people are constantly reminded by their spiritual leaders, and with great and solemn urgency in every hour of national peril, that they have entered into a holy covenant, and that they are called in a holy calling. When they proved disobedient, when their false priests profaned the sanctuaries, and their princes led them astray after adulterous alliances with foreign peoples and alien gods, then the great prophets appealed to the holiness of God as the divine law above the kings of Judah, and summoned the people by the holiness of God to repentance, and confession of their sin, and renewal of their covenant with Jehovah.

We are now prepared to see how under the influence, or, more truly it may be said, in the inspiration, of this faith in the Holy One who dwelt in the midst of Israel, the whole

moral conception of the Hebrews grew to be a thought of righteousness, and even with the later prophets, a passion for righteousness. Righteousness, as Matthew Arnold has so clearly seen, relates to conduct which is the larger part of human life. But the Hebrew idea of righteousness (as Mr. Arnold, with his fine literary, and poor historical method, has not so clearly seen), was inseparable from the Hebrew consciousness of the national relation to Jehovah as the Holy Lord God who went before the people in the cloud and pillar of fire, and who dwelt in their midst in the tabernacle. Their thought of righteousness did not distil from some vague and attenuated conception of "that vast not ourselves which transcends us;" it was the very concrete and pressing sense of the Lord their God, whose will had been made known in very definite commandments, and who was to be punctually and precisely served in rites *and ordinances* which embraced and hallowed

the whole course of life from Sabbath to Sabbath, from one sacred sacrifice and festival to another. Indeed, the most obvious defects and the chief limitations of the morality of the Old Testament, which seem perplexing to us, and which are sometimes urged against it as a divine morality, could hardly have arisen, and would be altogether inexplicable, had the prevalent conception of righteousness in Judea of old been only a refined and emotional idea of the law of the "Eternal Power not ourselves that makes for righteousness,"—that vague, vast, atmospheric something, in whose haze and distance the sublime faiths of the prophets lose their clear morning outline and definition. Matthew Arnold's modern English sense of Isaiah's poetry, and fine literary conception of Moses' law, are hardly the thought of the Lord God of Israel, the Holy God of Sabaoth, before whose voice of mighty thunderings the people trembled at Mount Sinai, and the vision of whom upon

the throne, high and lifted up, filling the whole earth with His glory, caused Isaiah to cry : " Woe is me ! for I am undone ; because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips : for mine eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts."

From the beginning righteousness meant in Israel a definite religious conduct of life, in obedience to positive commandments of the Lord their God, who was conceived of, not as a Power of vast indefiniteness, but in almost too concrete forms, and even bodily representations, as the covenant God of the chosen people.

One of the difficulties, indeed, to be overcome in the growth of the moral principles of the Bible was the too anthropomorphic and localised conception of God and His service, which rendered both worship and morality a too external and legal performance.

The late Mr. Walter Bagehot has remarked *very truly* that one of the first necessities in

the process of civilisation is to form a "social crust" of custom, and that one of the next necessities in the progress of civilisation is to break up that crust. The ceremonial law formed for ancient Israel the necessary social crust, which a people emerging from a nomadic or unsettled life must form for themselves ; but the crust grew very hard in the later Judaism, and the hard righteousness of the Scribes and Pharisees, which had grown around the vital kernel of the law, had to be broken up in order that Christianity might follow with its Gospel of free, spiritual righteousness for the world. But had there hovered before the minds of the great lawgiver and the prophets only some sublimated literary conception of Jehovah's righteousness, no moral crust sufficient for the first stage of civilisation could have been formed, and the later hardening of Judaism, which Christ broke up, would have had no place in history. It is

well to apply literary criticism to every part of the Bible, because the Bible is literature ; but it is also history, and a growth of history, and it cannot be understood or judged in its vital forces, and by its permanent fruits, without some historical training and sense.

It is quite necessary, therefore, for us to enter into the actual thought of righteousness which the Hebrews in the Old Testament times entertained, if we would not fail to understand both their moral strength and their moral limitations. Whoever lacks either the candour or the patience to study and to understand the idea of righteousness as the prophets cherished that idea, is unfitted to discuss or to pronounce judgment upon the moral difficulties of particular passages of the Old Testament. By easy ridicule, or through uninformed declamation against the faults of the Old Testament worthies, or the "mistakes of Moses," the hasty critic of the Bible may *himself* make mistakes of uncharitable and

false statements, for which Moses and the prophets might rise up in judgment against him.

The word "righteous," in its root idea, as we find it in the Old Testament, meant simply to be straight, or in the right. Righteousness is straightforwardness in all transactions. The righteous man goes in a straight way, and does not turn aside into crooked paths. But this quality of straightness, or rightness, implies some rule or standard of conduct. Hence the Hebrew idea of righteousness has been said with truth to contain always a "forensic reference." It implies, that is, the idea of a judge, and a judgment of conduct by some known law. The righteous man is he who keeps the prescribed law. The Hebrew law, as we have just observed, was the revealed will of the holy God, and as such it was positive, explicit, and comprehensive of human conduct. It embraced special ceremonial obligations to Jehovah, and also

common human and social relations and duties. These latter were to be fulfilled in conformity with this law of the Lord, and as parts of Israel's covenant obligations to Jehovah. Common human rights and duties received thus direct divine sanctions in Israel. Even the natural relationships and affections were included in the obedience which the people owed to the law which had been given to them.

The system of offerings and sacrifices was not simply a law of observances for the congregation of the people, a ceremonial for the assemblies of the tribes upon the great days of the festivals, but it was a system which reached into the homes, and embraced the family-life of the people, and laid its sacred claims upon every field and every house in Israel. The external omnipresence all around their life of this law, and its constant control of the routine of their existence, hindered the *growth of the idea* of individual conscience in

the Old Testament. The word "conscience," so common in later times, and so indispensable to us in our moral thinking, is a word not to be found in the earlier books of the Bible.

The chief fact which should be apprehended and emphasised just here is the fact that morality, or right human conduct, to the ancient Israelite was obedience to God in the whole conduct of his life. Righteousness was conformity in all acts and relations of life to the revealed will of Jehovah, in covenant with whom the holy people had their security, their prosperity, and their hope of future continuance as families in the land which the Lord their God had given them. We have been considering in these remarks not the larger fulfilment of this idea of righteousness which we find in the Apostolic epistles, but the germ of this idea, and its vitality in the mind of Israel of old.

4. We shall fail to understand the morality of the Old Testament unless we observe,

further, that it was a social morality. The roots of much legislation of the Pentateuch are to be discovered in existing social conditions and necessities. There were special laws which were fitted to particular social exigencies. Laws frequently are found surviving in the customs or legislation of a people long after the social needs in which they originated may have passed away. What is thus true of legislation in general—that it must be studied in its vital connection from age to age with the growth of a people, and their ever changing social conditions—is not to be forgotten in a just estimate of Hebrew law and morality, or regarded as inapplicable to the history of the Jews because it is a sacred history. The religion of the Hebrews gave, it is true, its special stamp to their social organisation, and broadly distinguished their social development from the history of other ancient civilisations. But we may trace, *nevertheless*, in the legislation and morality

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of Israel of old, the operation of common social laws, and we must study the morality of the Old Testament as a social growth and product. A long, winding way of history had been traversed between the city of David to whose temple Jesus came up, and the tents of the Patriarchs, or the Tabernacle of the Exodus. We see a chosen family becoming a great people, and successive stages of patriarchal, tribal, communal, and civic life are gained, and left behind, in the progress of that sacred history of which we have the record and the interpretation in the Old Testament. The moral growth keeps pace with the social development, and gains, or loses, with changing social conditions. The sacred laws follow the historic needs, and lead on, never too far in advance of the people to be their guides. Pastoral life, and village life, for example, their primitive wants and their increasing social necessities, furnish the explanation of some laws and customs which

otherwise would seem morally as well as historically inexplicable in the Old Testament. The law, for instance, relative to the common responsibility of the village community for murder grew out of a primitive want of some social order. So also the curious laws concerning fruit-trees, and bird's-nests, as well as some laws concerning land, and the release of debtors and slaves, bear traces of early agricultural times and needs.¹

That strange—and to us offensive—law of Goel² in Israel was doubtless first a necessity, and then a survival, of archaic justice. This law survived longer, indeed, in Israel than the natural progress of human society might seem to require, because it was bound up with another characteristic of the life of

¹ Deut. xxi. 1–9; xx. 19, 20; xxii. 6, 7; Exod. xxiii. 10, 11; Lev. xxv. 2, 7; Deut. xv. 1–3. See Fenton's "Early Hebrew Life" for examples of similar laws in other village communities.

² Deut. xix.; Numb. xxxv. 19 *seq.*; Deut. xxv. 5; Lev. xxv. 25.

the chosen people, which distinguishes their whole social constitution and growth—viz., the emphasis which was laid among them upon the family, and the line of family-descent, as the tie which bound every Israelite to Jehovah, his God, and the God of his fathers, and which gave him part in the covenant of the Lord and the promise of Abraham.

The family group in Israel, more than anywhere else, “coexisted or coalesced with the village or communal group.” “Neighbour and brother are interchangeable terms for a fellow Israelite.” The tribe is made up of families. “The return of an Israelite to his village was designated by the Hebrew writers as a return to his family, to the inheritance of his fathers.”¹ Even genealogies of persons appear to be “records of the relations of towns.” This emphasis which was put by the religion of Israel upon the family and the family-line, not only modified the natural growth of their

¹ Fenton, “Early Hebrew Life,” sect. xix.

social institutions, but affected also profoundly and widely the moral ideas and the moral growth of the people. It is a most noteworthy and important fact that the basis of morality in the Old Testament was laid not in the individual conscience, but in the family consciousness. Family morality preceded in the order of development individual morality. The rights and the perpetuity of the family were secured before the rights of the individual were distinctly defined, or the truth of personal immortality brought to light. God chose a family as the organ of His redemption, and God made the family the unit of the society which should know His will, and finally possess the earth. Redemption was providentially in history, as well as spiritually in Christ, a blessing and a baptism of the family. The family life comes first in the divine order of salvation. The first method of divine grace was by the choice and *consecration of the family*. This providential

work of founding Society and the Church upon the family involved, however, historically, some concessions to human weakness, some imperfect temporary laws, and passing permissions of unworthy customs, which, as we now look back upon them, are seen to be contrary to the divine idea of the family, and which, if they were allowed at present, would result in its destruction. Such limitations and imperfections belonging to the rudimentary stages of the divine idea of the family, which had been implanted in ancient Israel, are the exaltation of the patriarchal head of the family and the correspondingly undue subordination of woman, as well as the loose laws of divorce which Moses permitted.

In primitive society descent was often reckoned in the female rather than in the male line; and distinct traces of this primitive custom are found in the earlier Hebrew writings.¹ But paternal authority and the

¹ Gen. xxii. 20; xxxvi., *passim*; Judges ix. 1-3; xi. 1-3.

honour of the father as the head of the family must be secured as the first condition of a stable family-unit of society. To accomplish this may involve some temporary loss to woman. The tendency of the laws of Moses and the idea of the covenant was to bring paternal descent into prominence. The conception of true fatherhood was to be gained and honoured, as the basis of further social growth, and further revelation of God. Human fatherhood must become sacred, before ever the truth of the divine fatherhood can be realised in the consciousness of a people. Hence the connection of Israel with the covenant and the promise of Jehovah is through Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The Messiah shall be the Son of David. St. Matthew's book of genealogies is the royal table of male descent. It is true that this religious exaltation of the patriarchal idea in Israel was at first accompanied with some degradation of *woman, or, at least, failed of the true, full idea*

of womanhood. The patriarch might have several wives. Woman, at first, was held in unworthy subjection. But the providence of God seems to have been content to secure in this evil world one good thing at a time. God in history has not aimed to accomplish all good at once. Jehovah has been a long-suffering God. The idea of the family which first was divinely implanted in Israel was the hope of a participation in the covenant blessing through a sacred descent from Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. That idea made the patriarch prominent, and emphasised fatherhood. But it involved in it also the further idea of the sacredness of the mother as also a child of Abraham, and not a bondwoman. Motherhood became a sacred hope in Israel. The children of the Hebrew wife were preferred, while the child of the bondwoman was cast out. The family idea which gained secure and deep root in Israel brought forth in time as its perfect fruit a pure, and sweet, and lofty

conception of woman and the home. The earlier lax laws of divorce had their reason and necessity in the primitive historical conditions of the growth of the divine idea of the family. They were cast aside in due time, and as the result of the whole process there appeared at length the sacred family of the later Judaism, and the Christian home.

We need to keep in mind this fact, that the morality of the Old Testament was a social morality, and particularly the morality of a society whose unit is the family, in order that we may understand the comparative absence from the Old Testament of those ideas of individual rights and duties which are among our most familiar moral conceptions. Not until the family has been secured as the firm social group, or unit, can the individual as an individual stand forth. If the individual man with his rights had come first, the family with its sacred relations could hardly have come *afterwards*. Only social anarchy could result

by beginning with the rights of the individual. Extreme individualism among us now tends to destroy the family-unit of society, and would result, if unchecked, in social anarchy. The providence of God in the moral education of Israel for the good of all nations began with the human, the organic, the family relationships, and took all necessary time to imbed those relations firmly in the consciousness of the chosen people, content to bring out in later ages the full, developed ideas of individual rights and responsibilities. These truths were among the last, not the first lessons of Providence in the moral education of mankind. The God of the Old Testament made haste slowly and wisely and did not establish human society upon the apex, but upon the base of the pyramid. How necessary it was that centuries should be spent in laying the broad social base for the future upbuilding of humanity, may appear when we consider that at the present day,

in spite of our inheritance of the worked-out utilities and inestimable worth of the family, some reformers are ready to invert the divine order of history, and to render the whole social fabric unstable by resting all human rights and duties upon the small apex of individualism. The old Hebrew conception was not gained and secured for the modern nations at too great a cost. If we can keep our grasp upon this organic idea of the Hebrew-Christian family, the State cannot become in our day a mere bundle of social contracts between individual wills.

5. Another characteristic of the morality of the Old Testament which has thus far been implied should now receive distinct recognition. It is a progressive morality. The Mosaic code was not a perfect system of legislation, if by that be meant a moral system incapable of improvement, and fitted to stand as law for ever in the kingdom of *God*. *It would have been only a morality*

for heaven, if it had come down ready made and complete *from* heaven. It could never have been a law of social organisation and growth upon earth, had it been from the first in this sense a perfect, divine legislation. The Lawgiver of Israel was not an impracticable legislator. Jehovah was not a dreamer of dreams in Israel. The Lord knew the people whom He had chosen to be the bearers of His revelation—their grossness of nature, their stubbornness of will, their hardness of heart. He knew, consequently, what was to be done in their training—line upon line, and precept upon precept—in order that His will at last might be done on earth, and in the far issues of the history of the chosen people all the nations of the earth might be blessed. Hence the moral code of the Old Testament was a practical legislation for Israel in His day, although when judged by a better Christian standard it falls short in many particulars of absolute morals. As a true divine law and

leadership for a people it was adapted to the conditions of their life, and fitted in its requirements to their social exigencies and needs. In its wisdom for Israel it was perfect. We must admit the principle of accommodation, or educational fitness, which pervades the whole Old Testament dispensation, and without which there could have been no divine legislation, and no possibility of a future redemption of humanity, but only a series of divine judgments upon this earth. The fact is indisputable that the morality of the Old Testament was thus accommodative and progressive. Different stages and epochs in its progress can be easily marked. The laws which began to take form and definiteness in Moses' day were a distinct advance upon the unwritten laws and customs of the patriarchs. Human conduct in the Exodus comes under regulation which is at once more definite and severer. The moral teachings of the prophets show a distinct and

great advance in the growth of the ethical sense in Israel. There is more humanity in them. They are pervaded with an increasing consciousness of individual right and duty. There is in their words a deepening sense of personal obligation. And in the Messianic prophecy religion is already becoming more a spirit in man to inform his character, rather than an external law to regulate his actions. This moral progress is not gained, it is true, without some loss, and sins unknown in the age of patriarchal simplicity abound in the later more highly civilised and more commercial ages ; but, nevertheless, the morality of the Old Testament gains continuously in power, breadth, and spirituality, in the teaching of the great prophets.

This general progressive character of the Old Testament morality can be easily traced more definitely along several separate lines of advance. Take, for example, the custom of offering human sacrifices which prevailed

extensively among peoples with whom the Israelites were brought in contact. The altars of Moloch were stained with the blood of human sacrifices; but the national story among the Israelites of Abraham's offering of Isaac, as well as the prohibitions of Moses' law, and the teachings of the prophets that God loves mercy and not sacrifice, prevented this heathenish rite from ever becoming a custom in Israel, and rendered it in time abhorrent and impossible in Judaism, although an occasional prophetic warning against passing their first-born through the fire, and some apparent compliances of wicked kings with this abomination of the Canaanites, show that the temptation to the sacrifice of their children was by no means an unknown or distant temptation to Israel. In this respect, as in others, the true religion worked against the stream, and held Israel up against the natural gravitation of the times towards evil.

The progressive morality of the Old Tes-

tament has proved itself to be also a self-purifying morality. It casts off its own imperfections ; it breaks through its own trammels ; it supplies its own deficiencies.

Other moralities have shown a tendency to grow corrupt rather than clearer with age. The pure and living waters of their fountains were lost in the corruptions of the stagnant superstitions of later times. Though flowing, perhaps, from mountain springs, they have ended in a jungle. The course of religion in Israel was like the flow of a river which purifies its waters by its own motion, and broadens as it nears the ocean. In following Jehovah's commandments, their peace, as Isaiah declared, had been as a river, and their righteousness as the waves of the sea.

The lack of a living principle of development and self-correction has been noticed as a fatal defect in the Hindu, the Greek, and the Roman religions and codes. All of

them, as Canon Mozley has observed,¹ "led their respective communities a certain way in morals, but they all stopped short of any true development in morals." "Roman law," the same writer remarks, "as a moral law, works in chains." "Hindu law has not raised itself. In other nations, then, the ideas of justice, benevolence, purity, stay at an incipient stage, and never become more than half ideas." Moral ideas in the Old Testament, on the other hand, are constantly growing, and reaching out after larger completions of themselves. Though the people fall back, their prophets move on. Though kings lead the nation into alien idolatries, the word of Jehovah becomes more pronounced and commanding in the mouths of inspired prophets. The moral ideas with which the chosen people have been commissioned, and the hearts of the prophets enkindled, grow clearer and brighter in their struggle with the corruptions of Judah; they

¹ Mozley, "Ruling Ideas in Early Ages," p. 240.

are not smothered and extinguished, they flame up intenser and purer lights from the altars of the true Israel. The golden age of Hebrew virtue is never in the past, but always in the glory of the Messianic future. The nation was called in holiness, and righteousness is its goal. The law is to lead to something beyond itself. "Other nations ended as they began," or worse than they began. The law and the prophets ended better than they began.

The law of the Sabbath, to mention one notable example, was destined to become, in the teachings and example of the Messiah, a universal blessing for mankind. So the custom of assembling the people in the Temple, and the ritual of the priestly code, did not linger in later Judaism as mere superstitions, and become sources of popular corruption, but issued rather in schools of the law, and in synagogues of religious instruction, and took final form and freedom in the

Christian congregation, and the worship of the Christian Church.

This elasticity and recuperative power of morality in Israel is a repeated surprise to the student who comes from the study of contemporaneous nations to the history of religion in the Bible. This morality was able to save itself from the sins of the people. It proved a progressive morality, in spite of the moral gravitation of human nature, and particularly of gross Jewish nature, downwards. It reached its appointed goal, and found its full and rounded perfection in the Sermon on the Mount. It passed into the law of Christ, and is conserved in Christianity, although the people who were chosen to be its teachers were themselves sent into captivity, and the sins of the nation brought the divine drama of its history to a tragic close in the destruction of the holy city. Certainly, therefore, we are not qualified to sit in judgment upon *any particular* precept or act which was per-

mitted or commanded in the Old Testament, unless we have taken pains to follow from its source to its broad issues this wonderfully progressive and self-purifying moral life, which flows on and on through all the law and the prophets. The end was so vast, and so beneficent, that the source and continuous power of all this sacred history must have been from above.

6. It remains to be noticed that the morality of the Old Testament, because it was a progressive and self-purifying morality, furnished in its fulfilment the standard by which its earlier and preliminary stages may be judged. The final morality of the Bible, as Canon Mozley would say, is the test of all the morality of the Bible. The Bible, in this respect, as in others, yields to criticism the means for its own right criticism. It judges itself; it is self-discriminating; it gives to the careful student of its history its own canon; it yields from itself the principles by

which it is to be understood in all its parts. Absolute morality was not the virtue of any of the preparatory and preliminary stages of revelation, but the sinless goodness of the Christ is the fulfilment of the law and the prophets, by which all are to be interpreted and valued. No Messiah has come to be the fulfilment and the judge of any other system of legislation, or code of morals, or human philosophy of things. The Christ at the end of the Old Testament, and at the beginning of the New, is the Lord of the Scriptures, the Law and the Light of both dispensations. It was an Apostle of Christ, who had been trained in Judaism, and who had been sent to the Gentiles, who said : " He that is spiritual "—that is, he who has the Spirit of Christ—" judgeth all things, yet he himself is judged of no man."

The foregoing considerations, which might be largely illustrated by Bible-readings from *the Old Testament*, furnish us with two means

of estimating the moral quality of particular laws, acts, or examples, which may excite our inquiry in the sacred Scriptures. It is of much importance that in all cases we should distinguish between these two different standards of judgment, and learn how with either measure to judge righteous judgment. All will be confusion in our dealing with particular passages in the Old Testament of questionable morality, if we do not begin our study of them with a clear discrimination between these two different kinds of moral judgment which are possible to us.

These two ways of judgment are the relative and the absolute. By the latter we mean the moral judgment which is brought to light in Christ, the final moral judgment of the Bible. By the relative estimate we mean the judgment of an event or deed in relation to its times, as a part of contemporary morals, in comparison with the prevalent customs, and degree of moral illumination of its age. The

absolute judgment according to Christ is a revelation of the eternal worths, of things ; the relative judgment according to history takes considerate account of times and circumstances. We may consider what is revealed to us as in itself right and true—so far at least as our own Christian consciousness has become sufficiently enlightened and intense to apprehend it ; and we may also consider what was revealed to men as right and true in a past age, so far as in their moral consciousness they could receive it. We may judge what at a given time in the moral environment of a past generation was for them the best attainable virtue ; and we may seek to judge also what in itself, as revealed by Christ's Spirit, without reference to world-times, or seasons, is the perfect moral life. While all historical, or relative morality, must be brought to final judgment before Christ, the Lamb of God who taketh away the sin of the world, we need *have no hesitation* in recognising as a part of

the divine order of the world any event or character which we can see was relatively good, although by no means perfect. The question is not simply what is God's absolute holy will and what His omnipotence can bring to pass in divine judgments of the world, but rather what a loving God, who has condescended to put His power to service for a moral end under conditions of human freedom and historical development, might and would do at any given time or epoch of our history. And this question is not one of mere abstract possibility, but a question of history;—what under actually existing limitations of human progress from age to age has God done, or permitted to be done in His name, by men who were chosen as on the whole the best fitted men of their times to be co-workers with Him in His moral purpose for a world?

If indeed a rudimentary morality had ended in itself, and an embryonic spirit of goodness had never come to power and virtue in

history, then we might deny its divine origin and mission from God. If a rudimentary virtue, or a preparatory law, although imperfect, did not school mankind for the better things to come—if, in a word, it was not in its time and surroundings a helpful contribution to the moral education of the world,—then we should have reason to question whether it could be deemed a part of a divine order of moral development, or worthy a place in a Scripture which is held sacred. He who loves righteousness, and hates iniquity, may be long-suffering towards tendencies which on the whole make for righteousness, but not towards compromises with sin which tend to produce still greater wickedness. But if a moral code or example, however imperfect, as judged by an absolute standard, is adapted to the best atmosphere of its age, and has in it a manifest potency of higher moral growth, then we may cheerfully acknowledge its place and function *in the divine order* of our history. Although,

as we look back upon it, it may be imperfect morality for us, we recognise its necessity and fitness in its own place, and discern in it a degree of moral value relatively to its time, and the cruder moral ideas of its age. This is by no means to argue that the end justifies the means. It is simply to say that the only means possible, or the best means practicable, were chosen at a given time. It is only saying that the God of history, like the God of nature, has His eye always on the environment, as well as upon the life which is to be brought forward upon the earth. He does not require of life in the age of reptiles or fishes the greater and fairer works which are possible later in the age of mammals and of man. This is simply to believe that Divine Providence has worked in history wisely and patiently under the natural laws and conditions of human life. It is merely to observe that moral adaptation is a part of providence in history, as natural selection is in the creation.

It is to perceive that God has become man's teacher, and that He teaches not by power, nor by magic, but in accordance with the laws of human education, and does not withhold the patience and the forbearance which are required in the training of imperfect moral beings. Having chosen to redeem and to train man for eternal destinies, our God graciously puts Himself under the limitations of His chosen method, even though the Cross be finally required of His infinite heart of love for the accomplishment of His good purpose. Absolute commandment of wrong doing, or final commendation of a fault in a chosen character, would indeed imply that the narrative was not worthy of any place in the world's Bible. If such instances should be found in the Scripture, we should be compelled to suspect that tradition may have added foreign elements to some originally pure oracles of Jehovah. But human frailties *are not hidden* by the higher truths of

inspiration. And we should bear in mind, in reading the Old Testament, that temporary silence, or refraining from good but impracticable precepts, as well as not seeing some mistakes or faults of a pupil, are common, and sometimes very necessary virtues on the part of a successful teacher. Surely we cannot require of a divine education that it should transcend the conditions under which alone any education of a race of beings like ourselves becomes possible.

CHAPTER II.

ALLEGED MORAL DEFECTS.

AFTER this necessary preliminary discussion of the general principles of judgment of the morality of the Old Testament, we turn now to certain defects which are often alleged against these Scriptures, and to some passages which present confessed moral difficulties. These may be divided, for convenience, into two classes, viz., alleged imperfections of the morals of the Old Testament as a whole, and particular precepts, examples, or deeds, which seem objectionable.

It is often said to be an imperfection of the moral teaching of the whole Old Testament, that it is a morality for a class, or for a particular people, and not a universal morality. *It certainly* would not be possible to bring

many precepts of the laws of Moses under the categorical test which the philosopher Kant propounded as the supreme test of morals: "So act that the maxim of thy will can always at the same time hold good as a principle of universal legislation." The national spirit of Israel was exclusive, and the legislation of Moses was partial and limited. The belief that Jehovah was in some special sense their national God, and that they were the covenant-people of the Lord of all the earth, doubtless tended to foster a proud and hard national character; and consequently the moral consciousness of Israel lacked breadth, sweetness, and light of universal humanity. Ultimately this undeniable tendency of the election and the covenant was overcome by other forces inherent in the law and the prophets. Judged, however, from the absolute morality of the Christian consciousness, this fault of national exclusiveness in Israel is plain enough. The

doctrine of their special election became a limitation to human morals among the Jews. But relatively this national consciousness of their special mission and obligation to Jehovah was not only a virtue in its day, but also it was the only possible historical root—the one strong vigorous vitality—out of which the virtue of a universal humanity could grow and blossom. Relatively, or in comparison with the moral aimlessness of other ancient peoples, it was a good, and a great good, that Israel was inspired to believe in itself as ordained of God. The prophets taught that their election was for service, although they understood but little, and only from afar, how large and wonderful that service was to be. “Behold Israel, mine elect, my servant,” was the prophetic trumpet-call to the nation. The truth which the prophets proclaimed of Israel’s election as the servant of Jehovah was preparatory to the final Messianic Gospel of the *election of whomsoever will to God’s service*

for man. The Servant in whom prophecy was wholly fulfilled was the Saviour of the world. The lower preparatory lesson of their exclusive election must needs come first in Israel, although in learning it they are in danger of falling into a hard national pride which in turn will have to be broken up. First the relative, and then the absolute virtue; first the blade, and then the full corn in the ear;—such is the law of moral, as well as of natural, history. The husk of this ripe and perfect growth was left to wither and to be cast off in Pharisaism, while the truth and the love which from the first had been germinal in it appeared in the fruits of Christianity which remain. The earlier particularism, or Judaic exclusiveness, which if left would have been an evil, offensive thing, was judged and cast out in the progress of the history. Yet we must not forget that there was a time when the husk was necessary to the growth of the corn in the ear. Nor was the husk

when it first appeared, when it was the natural envelope of the growing ear, the dead and worthless thing which it became after the corn was ripe, and the harvest was ready. In the Spring-time of the world many a law and custom were good and pleasant to behold, which afterwards, when history was well advanced, were seen to be but husks to be stripped off and to be burned. The exclusiveness of Moses, and of the prophets, so far as it can be charged upon them, was relatively good, although not of abiding, absolute moral worth; but the exclusiveness of the later Judaism, when the Son of Man stood before the Pharisees and Scribes, was both relatively and absolutely bad. There was no longer need for a particle of it to protect the true religion of Israel; and without further use for the true life of Israel, it became like the husk when stripped from the grain, a dry, dead, and worthless thing.

We might as well, then, think of quarrel-

ling with our cradles, as with the early particularism and narrowness of the Old Testament.

A second general defect which is often alleged against the morality of the Old Testament is akin to that just mentioned, yet it is distinct enough to receive separate notice. We refer to the defect of legalism in the moral conception and conduct of Israel. Legalism appears as a limitation in many characters, and shadows even the simplest and most personal religious experience of psalmist and prophet. No Old Testament character may be said to have escaped altogether from its chill and confinement. Even John the Baptist, who has his foot on the threshold of the New Dispensation, and whose face is turned towards the Messianic Light, stands, a grand prophetic form, half-hidden in the shadows of the Old. We have the best authority for affirming that the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.

Judged, accordingly, by the absolute morality of Christ, the Old Testament as a whole is a defective legal morality. St. Paul could find no rest or peace in it. But the law was relatively good : in its time, and for the schoolmaster's purpose, St. Paul, who would have no more of it, declared it to be holy, just, and good. In comparison with all contemporary codes and morals never had a schoolmaster like this law been sent from God.

We need not dwell longer on these general and admitted imperfections, or relative defects, of the morality of the Old Testament. The law given by Moses was plainly enough the historical sheath of the growing morality of the Spirit ; and when that which is perfect was come, then that which was in part fell of itself away.

We pass on to the second class of difficulties suggested. These difficulties, which are presented by some of the narratives, or *which spring* out of particular texts of the

Old Testament, may be conveniently considered under the following heads:—1st. Approval of imperfect characters. 2nd. Alleged divine commandment or permission of deeds which cannot easily be justified upon principles of absolute morality. 3rd. Defective laws for the government and regulation of the social life of the people. 4th. Doubtful moral sentiments in writings said to have been inspired.

1st. It is often felt as a difficulty that some very imperfect characters are apparently marked by the divine approval in the narratives of the Old Testament. Men who cherished dispositions, or committed deeds, which would now put them under a social ban, or even subject them to legal punishment, not only escape divine retributions, but are numbered among the saints of the Old Testament. Abraham at times failed to act a man's part. Jacob's career began in a fraud; his natural disposition seems to have

been marked by the questionable trait of smartness ; he was a tricky boy. Esau was frank and generous. Yet Jacob was chosen, and Esau was rejected. And David, according to his own confession, had committed a deadly sin. Certainly those ancient patriarchs and kings were imperfect characters. They were all sinners. And there were deep stains upon the characters of some of them—foul blots which the Biblical writers have taken no pains to conceal. Some of these faults which we see upon the surface of the narrative the Biblical writers indeed do not even seem to have perceived. They record without sign of disapproval deeds of which we can hardly read without a blush. And Jesus Christ, who looked both backward down the history of Israel to its beginnings in God's good purpose, and forward also up the lines of Christian virtue to the city of God which shall descend from heaven, expressly declared *that the least in the kingdom of heaven is*

greater than the greatest of the prophets. No Christian interest is served by laboured apologies for the faults or crimes of Old Testament worthies. We should greatly err in our moral judgment should we not be ready to condemn Jacob's over-shrewdness, and David's sin, as we now discover their iniquity in the clear light of that absolute law of purity and love which is revealed to us in Christ. Men ought to be punished in a Christian land, if they should do such things as were sometimes done without punishment in the land of Israel. Men ought to be cast out of the Church who might have sat in the uppermost seats of the synagogue. But this judgment of absolute morality—so far as we are able in Christ to pronounce it—upon any historical character, is one thing; and the judgment of relative morality is another thing. The former should not be lowered for any presumed apologetic interest, nor obscured by any religious reverence for sacred

writings or characters. The justice, however, as well as charity, of a judgment relative to the contemporaneous morals and the degree of light prevailing in a past age, which we willingly accord to characters in profane history, should not be withheld from the Old Testament characters because they were chosen by God for a special purpose, and are seen to have stood in the sacred succession of the bearers of a divine revelation, and a divine promise to mankind. The pertinent and fair questions which should be raised concerning these characters are these:—Did they possess the moral material which fitted them for the moral purpose for which they were chosen? Were their virtues in the line of the purpose of good which was to be worked out in their day and generation? Were their faults, however serious, fatal to their use for that moral end? Were their faults flaws and knots in the grain, which, *however hard and ugly*, did not prevent their

being worked up for their place in the structural purpose of God in history? We may allow knots in the framework of a building which would be intolerable in the finish of a home.

We need to consider, further, whether characters which at first glance might seem more admirable, and of finer stuff, presented to the choice and uses of the Divine Providence such combinations of virtues and defects as best fitted them for the work to be done—as good material, on the whole, as could be found in their times and seasons. And, moreover, we should inquire whether different persons, had they been elected for this sacred service, could have been so thoroughly purged in time of their evil, and so confirmed in righteousness, as were the characters which were actually chosen to be the messengers of the divine will, and the workers in the divine order of the world. Could a better line of succession on the whole

have been chosen than that of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob? And still further, a fair estimate of the morality of the divine selection and use of these characters, would involve the inquiry whether in the working out in them and through them of God's purpose, their virtues were utilised and made clear and prominent, while their faults were cut down, left behind, and shown in the course of the history to be impediments to Jehovah's will. In the development of the divine drama in which they were elected to play their sacred parts, were their sins seen to be contrary to the consummation towards which the history through all its acts was tending? In one word, did not their election also prove to be their judgment?

Compare in these respects the lives of Esau and Jacob. The former at first is the more attractive character. The latter in his youth shows a serious fault of disposition. The *former was the popular character*; the latter

was his mother's favourite. Nevertheless, the divine election made no mistake. Esau was not the kind of man who could be used for a great purpose. Jacob, notwithstanding his naturally overreaching disposition, had the moral making in him of the founder of a great house. He was chosen, in spite of the natural flaws of his character, for the strength and persistence which Providence needed then and there in its history-building. Esau, in spite of the popular elements in his nature, was rejected because he did not possess the steadfast and sturdy virtue which must be the first moral endowment of one who is called to stand in the succession of those who are chosen to be the pillars and the supports of a great purpose and way of the Lord in history. The divine choice and moulding of Jacob ultimately reduced to a minimum the natural faults of the man, and brought out the virtue which was needed for his place and use in that purpose of Jehovah. In the careers of men like

Jacob or David, we can plainly see that a divine discipline accompanied and perfected the divine choice of them, humiliating them, bringing them through defeats and suffering to knowledge of themselves, and penitence for their sins, and consecrating them by its flames of trial and affliction for the high and holy use which God would make of them. Under the law there was a purgatorial discipline of the elect servants which searched motives, and refined characters. Temporary and partial retributions for relative immoralities were visited upon patriarchs, prophets, and kings, who were chosen to be workers with God for the final, absolute moral good of redemption. Upon the pages of this sacred history Jačob is seen to suffer for the sin of his youth, and to gain a new revelation of Jehovah through that night of wrestling; and the one psalm which has been wrought into our Bible for the confession of the sin of the world was learned, *every penitent* line and bitter sorrow of it,

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through the agony of a soul which had been chosen to a royal destiny, and convicted by the word of the Lord of a grievous sin.

We turn to another passage, the story of Abraham's offering of Isaac, a narrative which has caused more moral perplexity among readers, and more moral confusion among devout commentators than any other chapter of the Bible. This simple, pathetic story of trust and obedience has been a lesson of submission to God's will for the Church in all ages. In the New Testament, Abraham's faith becomes the type of a perfect spiritual trust. Yet this rare and beautiful example, if torn from its historical setting, becomes an impossible example, and Abraham's act, when it has been conceived of as right in itself, and even as conduct still laudable, if commanded by God, has tempted diseased minds into deeds of religious frenzy. No example could be a clearer illustration of the distinction which we must constantly make in reading the Old Testament between the

morality which is relative to an age, and its degree of moral illumination, and absolute morality, or the moral considered independently of time and circumstance.

The history of Abraham's offering becomes intelligible and profitable only as we receive it in its natural and simple pathos ; or only, if we reflect upon it, as we distinguish between the temporary and imperfect conditions under which such conduct was once morally possible, and the absolute and permanent truths of faith and obedience which lie enfolded in those accidental historical surroundings. The spiritual worth which gives the narrative its inestimable value, comes to us wrapped in a historical dressing which must be cast away. As we read the touching story, we feel that under no circumstances could we do such a thing. No conceivable sound or sign from heaven could be to our hearts a command from the God we worship to bind a dear child *upon an altar* for the flames ; we would die

rather than make such a sacrifice. We would rather be tortured, if need be, and slain, by the Power of the universe which could command a deed utterly repugnant to our sense of fatherhood and its divine obligation to a child. We could not admit from God without us a commandment contrary to God within our human conscience. Abraham's act would be wrong, and consequently morally impossible to us, in our Christian sense of fatherhood, as an imagined act of obedience to our God. But, on the other hand, we do not impute this first instinctive thought of ours to Abraham. As we read the Biblical story, letting it make its natural impression upon us, we do not transfer our sense of the absolute wrong of such a deed to Abraham. Our sympathy, not our condemnation, goes with him on the hard journey to the mountain of sacrifice. It is apparent that he did not have in his early day our sense of the sin of offering a child in sacrifice to a supposed divine

command. He acted throughout in perfect simplicity of faith. The act was a trial—a grievous trial—to his parental affection and hope, but not a temptation to his conscience. His conduct was proof of his entire willingness to obey God, but not evidence of his perfect knowledge of God. It shows that he trusted wholly a God whom he knew only in very small part. The act was evidence of a great, manly faith, and of only a little, childish ability to understand what God would really have him do. Had he been somewhat farther advanced in the knowledge of the God of our Bible, that particular trial of his faith would have been a moral impossibility. He would have known at once that God would have mercy and not sacrifice. He would not have needed to make that painful journey up that lonely and awful mount, before he could rejoice in the truth of God which he learned upon its mercy-crowned top, that the Lord *is not to be pleased* by the father's hand laid

upon his child, but will provide Himself a lamb for the sacrifice.

But at just his stage of moral education, with the ideas of the age which he still shared, at that particular point in the moral education of the world at which Abraham stood when God called him, it was possible for Providence in this severe manner, in this rude form of instruction, to teach the first needed lesson of entire submission to God—the absolutely indispensable lesson of perfect obedience to God's will, which man must learn in order to further progress in knowledge of God. Of that lesson Abraham was made the master and the teacher to all the faithful by the trial of his faith. In teaching him that elementary lesson which the elect servant must learn by heart, God suffered Himself for a time to be misunderstood, cruelly misunderstood, by his chosen pupil. With patient forbearance God permitted Abraham to cherish all the long way up that mountain a wrong

thought of Himself. It must have been a trial to the Divine Teacher, as well as to Abraham his pupil, to be misunderstood by man. Abraham's trial of faith is part also of the history of the divine sympathy with man. It is a chapter also in this long earth-history of God's patience with the world. And that patience and willingness to be misunderstood on the part of the Divine Teacher while Abraham goes up to worship with a false thought of God in his heart, was the means of bringing him ere long to a great discovery of God. This accommodation of the Divine Teacher in the method of His instruction to the relatively low standard and elementary moral attainments of the age, proved to be the beginning of a new chapter in the world's knowledge of God's perfect and holy will. Abraham went down from that mountain with a diviner revelation in his soul than he had ever dreamed of before. It was a new *revelation of God* to his age. It made him a

man of God far in advance of his times. He knew, as he went down the mountain with Isaac his only son, that God does not require the shedding of blood, and that His will is something larger, holier, happier, than he had ever thought before. He knew in dawning revelation the truth of God which afterwards prophets were inspired to teach, and of which the Spirit of Christ is convincing the world, that God loves mercy rather than sacrifice; that like as a father pitieth his children, so God pitieth us; and that in the deepest instincts and holiest love of human fatherhood we have the fullest disclosure of the nature of our Father who is in heaven.

Distinguishing thus between the form and the substance of this divine lesson which it was necessary for Abraham to learn by heart in order that he might become the father of a chosen nation, we shall not misuse the sacred narrative, nor fail to discern its abiding truth. It is contrary to good morals to seek to justify

the divine method of Abraham's instruction upon the ground that God has a right to command an action against the law which He has written in our hearts. To suppose that God could for a moment have intended to require the sacrifice of Isaac, or could have claimed it as a rightful act of obedience from a man made in the image of his own Fatherhood, would be simply to imagine that God can contradict Himself, speaking in one voice in the world without us, and in another voice in the conscience of the spiritual man. Rather it is part of the divine condescension in the history of redemption that the Lord has been willing to speak through man's broken words of faith, and in crude, rudimentary methods to impart knowledge of His real character and graciousness. We may suppose that the Christ in God's eternal Being entered in profoundest sympathy into the sufferings of Abraham's almost broken heart, as he toiled *slowly up the mountain*, every step a pain.

We may well think there was joy in heaven, like the joy in which Christ beholds the travail of his soul and is satisfied, when at last the perfect obedience of Abraham had been rendered, and the ram could be provided. And a new, glorious vision of God whose light shall not fail for all the future had appeared to Abraham and to Isaac also, like a dawn of a new day of the Lord. How effectually, though with such divine patience, and at such cost of self-restraint to the Divine Teacher, as well as of trial to the human pupil, the truths of a more spiritual faith, and of the perfect obedience, were taught the patriarch and father of Israel, is evident from the historical fact that this divine object-lesson never needed to be repeated again in Israel. Other nations went on sacrificing their first-born, vainly imagining, as Abraham once for a brief hour had thought, that such cruelties of men can be pleasing to God. Occasionally an idolatrous king may

have stained his reign with the abominations of the Canaanites, and caused his sons to pass through the fire to Moloch ; but only the blood of bulls and goats shall flow around the altars of the true Israel ; the children of Abraham shall not lawfully be offered in sacrifice to Abraham's God. And when He shall come in whom all imperfect types are made perfect in one divinely human example, then will Abraham's faith, freed from its blinding conceptions of God's will, its limited knowledge of God's purpose, and all that was temporal and unworthy in the moral ideas of its age, become in its spiritual truth and beauty, its pathos of sacrifice, and its perfectness of trust, a lesson which apostles of the Lord may commend to the heart of the Church, and this simple Biblical narrative will remain an inspired Scripture profitable in all ages for instruction in righteousness. In its pure truth of obedience and faith Abraham's trial will be *the type of the one perfect Sacrifice.*

CHAPTER III.

FURTHER INSTANCES OF ALLEGED IMPERFECTIONS.

WE pass to the consideration of the second class of difficulties—the permission or commandment by the word of the Lord of deeds of doubtful morality.

Exception has often been taken against the morality of the Old Testament, because the judicial destruction of whole families for the sin of one member of it was sanctioned in several instances, and because devastating wars of great cruelty were waged by Israel in obedience to a supposed divine commandment. The case of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram, will be cited as a fearful example, and the destruction of “all that appertained to them” seems to be a frightful exaggeration of justice. A

similar instance was the destruction of the whole house of Achan for the sin of the head of the family. And in the exterminating wars of the Jews, not only were the combatants, the men of the cities, to be put to death, but also the women, and children, and nurslings. Such wholesale annihilation of the entire population of a hostile city or land would be, in the judgment of the civilised world, a massacre which no military necessity could justify. No Christian nation to-day would dare think of building up its empire by imitating the example of Israel in the destruction of the Canaanites.

All such instances as these, and the moral difficulties involved in them, may be considered together, for they all proceed upon the same principle to which we take exception, viz., the visitation upon the innocent of the sins or misfortunes of others. Justice in our courts seeks to grasp the individual *man*, and to hold the guilty person alone

responsible for a crime. Military necessity in civilised warfare warrants the destruction of those objects only which cannot, with strategic safety, be left in the rear, and it spares so far as possible the non-combatants. But in Israel, justice seems in several instances to have grasped blindly whole families, and the wars of the Jews annihilated entire communities. Our difficulty with this class of passages in the Old Testament does not arise from any severities which may have been required in the infliction of punishment upon individuals, nor from the destruction of life and property which is sometimes incidental to a war for the progress of civilisation ; but our objection lies against much that seems wanton, unnecessary, and reckless, in the infliction of judicial penalties, and in the exterminating wars of the Jews. How, we ask, could a just God ever have tolerated such blind, extravagant exhibitions of justice? How could waste of human life, so unnecessary and

fearful, be permitted by a merciful God? Do not our instincts condemn these histories? Certainly *our* instincts do, for our instincts are the results of the whole education of our race from Moses to Christ, and in this present dispensation of the Spirit. But it is evident, on the face of these narratives, that the moral instincts of Israel were not thus offended; that scenes which we can hardly read of without a sense of wrong, they saw enacted with a sense of satisfied justice. Moreover, it is the historical fact that such judicial visitations, and such acts of wholesale slaughter, did not offend the contemporary sense of justice among the nations of the earth. Long after the prophets of Israel had taught that God did not visit the sins of the fathers upon the children, and the judicial destruction of whole families had ceased to be witnessed in Israel, Eastern monarchs, as Canon Mozley in this connection has reminded us, were accustomed *to put entire families to death sometimes from*

slight suspicion, or with little reason for the infliction of any penalty.

The truth is that the idea of the individual was not one of the worked-out ideas of antiquity. The family was a part of the man. Wives and children belonged to him, were his appurtenances, and together with him constituted the legal personality upon which primitive justice might seize. Acts of wholesale punishment and slaughter, consequently, which could not now be perpetrated without raising a cry of horror from the whole Christian world, were not offences in an age in which the sense of justice resembled a child's passionate vindictiveness, and in which the moral individual had not yet been clearly separated from all his personal surroundings. Such instances of wholesale punishment were permitted by what may be called the common law of the world, which was contemporary with Israel, and were in accordance with its undeveloped, strong, yet indiscriminating

sense of justice. A distinct and noteworthy advance, however, in this matter was made by the Mosaic legislation. In this respect, also, as in many others, Israel was in advance of its times. For under the Mosaic constitution such acts of judicial visitation were not left to the caprice of the ruler, or authorised by the common law; they were performed only in obedience to what was supposed to be some special divine permission or injunction. These acts were not in the common course of justice in Israel. They are to be considered, therefore, not as ordinary, but as extraordinary cases. Moses and the judges of Israel could not at their own will, and for reasons of their own, inflict such penalties as Oriental monarchs might, whenever they pleased. The statute-law in Israel was in its final form positive and distinct: "The fathers shall not be put to death for the children, neither shall the children be put to death for the fathers: *every man shall be put to death for his own*

sin.”¹ What other Oriental nation so early in history gained a positive law like that? It was in Israel a great advance over contemporary justice. It took away from the kings of Israel one of the common prerogatives of the Oriental monarch, who could fling, as Darius did, the families of the false accusers—men, women, and children—into the lions’ den. But such a thing was not then known in Israel. From the first, only under severe and solemn restraints could such wholesale exhibitions of justice be witnessed in Israel. There must be a supposed divine sanction for the destruction of a whole household, or some supposed divine permission for a devastating war. These acts were from the first (as Canon Mozley has clearly shown), “extra-legal” in Israel; and it marks the higher Power at work in their history, and the diviner Spirit which had begun to exalt their whole moral conception, and to turn it towards the coming Messianic

¹ Deut. xxiv. 16.

mercy and justice, that such instances, so common in the history of all other Oriental nations, are exceptional and extraordinary in Israel, and that such deeds were not regarded by the chosen people as right without some special authorisation through an inspired leader, or by some sign from heaven.

What we have to consider, then, in our relative or comparative estimate of those terrible acts, and those scenes of bloodshed, is not the morality of the law of Israel, which did not permit them, but simply the fact that they were permitted, or supposed to be required by Jehovah, according to the convictions of the leaders of the people, at several very extraordinary conjunctures, and in a few special exigencies in the history of Israel. The one question which meets us is not whether these acts are abstractly just, for to a Christian conscience they are *not*; nor whether their repetition would be *permissible* now under any possible circum-

stances, for our world has outgrown the conditions and ideas under which they could become possible moral acts: but the simple question is whether at the time, and under the conditions in which they occurred, they were once historically necessary, and were morally the best course which could then have been chosen and followed in the divine education and redemption of the world. If they were acts which not only fitted the ideas of the times, but were so permitted or commanded, under such authorisation and restraints, as to secure the moral advancement of mankind, and to lead Israel in the shortest way beyond the necessity of their repetition—if, in one word, they were morally disciplinary and didactic—then in the providential development of justice and progress of civilisation, they do not lie exposed to the criticism and objection which at first view seems to obtain against them. They indicated the best that could be done under the

circumstances. God requires no more of us ; should we ask more of God in our history ? In those rude ages the selection of the individual merely for punishment would not have satisfied the then existing sense of justice. If the individual alone had been punished, and his family name been left to continue to all generations, the sense of justice would have been left unsatisfied. Individual punishment would have made a faint impression of the power of divine justice upon the mind of Israel. It might have seemed even to be the failure of justice on the earth, if the wicked man's children had been left in prosperity and he only cut off. The exhibition of divine justice and sovereignty may well have some correspondence to the receptive capacity of an age—to the more or less developed power of an age to perceive and to feel it. Once mighty thunderings and lightnings were *necessary* to impress the undeveloped *conscience* of a gross people. God's revelations

in the law, and in the Spirit, have fitness to their times and seasons. Less awful examples of divine retributions than those recorded upon the pages of the Old Testament might not have had the moral effect which had to be produced upon the people of Israel, or the whole divine cause for which they had been chosen would be lost. Nothing less in Moses' day than the terrific punishment which overtook the three arch-conspirators would probably have secured the leadership of Moses in the wilderness. To maintain that leadership was the first exigency of Providence—the supreme military necessity to which Jehovah by His word of promise was pledged, and to which in the deliverance of the chosen people from Egypt everything else, if need be, must be sacrificed. The hope of Israel, the ultimate Messianic hope of the world, depended upon the maintenance of that authority and the continuance of that leadership of the great lawgiver and prophet. And the providence

of God was equal to the emergency. No sentiment of pity was allowed to interfere with the work that must be done, or all was lost. The moral scruples of the later ages had no place in the duties of that early, critical hour. Divine Providence never flinches from necessary surgery upon humanity. The necessary exhibition of divine sovereignty and divine justice was given in Moses' day, and with a power so tremendous, and an effect so terrific, that Israel would not need to be dealt with so severely a second time. Once afterwards, but upon a smaller scale, was a repetition of such justice required, when Joshua made an example of Achan and all his house.

In like manner it may be said of the destruction of the Canaanites that there was but one choice open to the Providence which had taken Israel up as the peculiar people through whom all the nations of the earth were finally to be blessed. Either it must *give up its* task as hopeless, or it must pre-

pare at any cost the conditions around Israel amid which its moral destiny can hopefully be worked out. Either it must give up the task of educating and "inspiring a nation of teachers" for the world, and in its method of redemption become a violent supernaturalism on earth (which would be contrary to God as love, as well as to nature as law), or else it must do the best that can be done under existing human conditions for the planting and protection of the moral life which shall eventually blossom into the Gospel for the world. The first alternative would destroy, and not fulfil human nature ; and God in His providence and grace does not seek to take the kingdom of heaven by violence for us. The other way only seems to have been open to the Providence which comes working down through our human history not to destroy, but to fulfil. God in His wisdom and grace has not attempted to have His perfect work done in a moment of time on earth by

miracle and violence to nature, but He has sought to reach the perfect will of His love on earth through long-suffering, and by the way of the Cross. God's chosen method, at all events, has been a course of human education, inspiration, and redemption. Hence Jehovah, in conformity to His own all-wise method with man, then and there in Israel did, or permitted to be done, whatever was necessary for the hope of Israel, and for the hope of the world which was staked upon His choice of Israel His servant. God made room for the chosen people in the promised land, and suffered them to clear from all idolatrous associations a sufficient space for their habitation. That space, however, thus cleared for Israel's promise, was by no means the most thickly settled portion of the world. He led His people forth from Egypt, and through the wilderness. Providence made a *fit* place on earth for the dwelling-place of *its* chosen servant at probably the least

possible cost of other life. To sacrifice ruthlessly the lands and lives, even of wicked and idolatrous tribes, was indeed a hard necessity of our history of sin ; yet it was a necessity to which, however hard, God condescended, that in the seed of Abraham at last all nations might be blessed. So in later times, and even in our modern civilisations, there have been hard necessities of Providence, and seasons of much divine long-suffering and patience with mankind. God with us in Christ has been bearing the burden of our necessities of cruel wars for liberty, and of most costly sacrifices for His kingdom's sake.

We do not seek to justify these historical providences, be it observed, merely on the ground that God as the Creator has right to all life, and that He can preserve or destroy whom He will. Whatever degree of truth there may be in such assertions, they do not cover the whole moral reason for the death of

any individual man. Created life, or delegated being, has rights from God which He will not violate, for He gave them. The moral justification of a pestilence, or of any natural devastation, is never completely given by the mere assertion of the Creator's primal and abstract rights in His creation. The full and final justification is to be found in God's moral purpose, and in the relation of any particular famine, earthquake, pestilence, calamity, or death, to that moral purpose and the issues under it of all life. The judicial destruction of whole families, therefore, or the annihilation of an entire community, is not morally accounted for by referring such massacres to the natural rights of the Creator in His creatures; it can receive its moral explanation only as its relations to moral ends, and the necessities of moral methods are brought to light. Suffering in general has its moral vindication in the creation of a *good God*, only as we shall be enabled to

perceive its moral place and meaning in human history, and there shall be revealed at last its entire relation to the moral history of the whole universe.

One further consideration, indeed, which is usually overlooked, must be added to these reflections, or the justification which has just now been suggested of these extreme exhibitions of punishment, and of so much apparently reckless destruction of human life, would remain not entirely satisfactory, and seem incomplete. We can perceive that historical exigencies may occasionally impose hard duties upon a Providence that has subjected its working for good to natural laws of human development ; we can understand how impressive examples may sometimes be required at the cost of much hardship and suffering even of innocent persons ; but after all this has been said, we cannot rid ourselves entirely of our conviction that something is still due to the innocent who were involved in providential

necessities of suffering, and that the individual person has some ultimate personal rights, even against the welfare of the family or the nation, which a God of perfect faithfulness to all His creatures will not forget. We can admit the rightfulness of *temporary* sacrifices of the individual for the general good, and the justice of momentary disregard of the rights of the individual for the benefit of the whole community. We accept freely the principle of voluntary sacrifice by the individual of his rights, his happiness, and even his life, for the salvation of a people, or the blessing of humanity. But we could not accept this principle of the sacrifice by God's will of the individual, if we regarded that sacrifice as an eternal sacrifice. In the eternal justice, each individual man must come to his perfect right and full moral fruition, as well as the whole humanity for which he may have suffered or died reach its consummation. And *at the heart of every noble sacrifice is cherished*

the hope of the coming world-age, in whose glory the martyr with all the saints for whom he dies shall be crowned. The Christ shall see of the travail of his soul and be satisfied. The idea of the divine education of the race, which we have been using thus far in our discussion of these severe providences, requires for its vindication and completion the further idea that, in the consummation of the whole history of mankind, each and every individual, according to his deserts, shall receive his personal right and his personal share in the good for which he may have been sacrificed in his day upon this earth. Each individual, whatever may have been his time or generation, his part and place in the great drama of history, shall be present to behold the end of the world, and to receive for himself his fair and proper portion in the judgment of the eternal God, with whom there is no respect of persons, and who surely, therefore, at the end of the world, shall not deal with the indi-

viduals whom at different times he permitted to be born into this world-age, upon different and unequal planes of justice, and upon diverse principles of judgment—some by the law of nature, and others by the law of Moses, and others still by the law of the Spirit of Christ—but who shall deal with all alike, and show Himself to all in His eternal judgments to be the same just and merciful Christian God. We must believe thus, or the whole unfolding plan of God's moral judgment of the world, with its inequalities of temporal conditions, and its cruel historical necessities, would present absolute moral difficulties. It may be said, indeed, that the Canaanites were sunken in hopeless idolatries, and deserved extermination as tribes from the earth. But the providential selection of the favoured races has not been determined by any human merit, for all have sinned. The grace which chose Israel for its special service *in this* world, and in the same temporal *election rejected* the inhabitants of the plain,

is an eternal grace which shall eventually bring in the fulness of the Gentiles. We cannot admit that any inequalities of temporal circumstance, of place, or season, in this world-history, shall prevent for any individual soul its final perfect judgment upon the plane of Christian motive and redemption. We may trust divine grace eventually to meet all alike in its utmost Christian revelation and power. We may believe, therefore, that every Amalekite child, or Canaanite woman, whom the military necessities of God's providence in this world brought to an untimely and cruel death, shall pass elsewhere before God as individuals to receive Christian opportunity and final Christian judgment. We must believe that each member of every Hebrew family who was taken from earth because of his connection with the head of the family who had sinned, in those earlier days of revelation before the individual had become the separate and personal soul which

he is to the eye of absolute Justice, shall be regarded and rewarded according to his personal rights and his personal trial in the final Christian judgment of the world. And this world-age will not come to an end, and Hades give up its dead, and these former things pass away, until God shall see that all things are ready, and every soul of man may receive its own reward upon the one divine principle of the last judgment, according to Jesus Christ. This is only to believe and to say that God shall ultimately show Himself to all generations as the Christian God. The Lord of all time is Christ; and with this belief in the final Christian relation and revelation of God to all souls from all the generations, the temporary loss or gain, the evil or the good experienced by any man or people in time becomes a minor and secondary consideration. The justice of God to the world as a whole will be vindicated in the *perfect end* and consummation of the whole,

and the Christian character and grace of God in relation to every individual soul will appear in the eternal gain, or the eternal loss of life, from the Christian plane of redemption, in the final judgment of each individual soul, when the end of the whole world-age shall have come. If we take away this belief, and leave out of view this hope of the Gospel for all ages and generations of men, every attempt to explain the dealings of the God of Israel with the Gentiles, or indeed to account for existing inequalities of circumstance and opportunity between the Christian and the heathen worlds, is encompassed with moral darkness and difficulty. The further pursuit, however, of this thought would lead us beyond the proper limits of our special subject. This much should be suggested at this point for the complete moral justification of our view of the method of the divine education of the race.

CHAPTER IV.

MORAL DEFECTS OF MOSAIC LAW.

ONE other class of difficulties remains to be considered, viz., the moral defects of some of the laws of Moses. Those laws were certainly not ideally perfect. Some of them were evidently first attempts at social justice. Indeed, the earlier legislation of Israel as a whole was a scaffolding rather than a finished construction of social order. If we suppose that laws, alleged to have been given by inspiration of God, must therefore be abstractly and ideally perfect, we certainly shall find stumbling-blocks in the way of such a conception of inspiration upon almost every page of the Mosaic legislation. If we are not ready to admit that the divine wisdom in the *world from age to age* will be always just

the most practical wisdom, the most fitting counsel for each age, then much in this Bible which was given from time to time, and in divers manners, for the life of the world, will remain to us inexplicable, and may be an offence to our impracticable faith. Both in creation and in providence God is the one perfect Idealist—His eternal purpose in Christ Jesus has been a purpose of perfect good from before the foundation of the world. But God is also a daily, hourly, practical providence in our world of good and evil. His perfect love is also the power of age-long patience, and infrustrable skill, which steadily works out, through these human materials, from century to century, its vast designs. And with the Lord a thousand years are as one day, and one day as a thousand years. Accordingly, of the Mosaic legislation in general it may be said without hesitation that, just because it was inspired, it was a code adapted remarkably to the existing family, communal, and

national conditions, for which from time to time it was given; that its higher and difficult commandments were educational and helpful to the further moral aim of God in Israel; that it was a code which has proved itself capable of expansion and adaptation to changed circumstances; that in the course of the history it dropped off not a few of its ruder, archaic features; that from the first it sought humanity, and wrought justice among the people; and that in the fulness of time the principles of social morality which informed it, and which had worked righteousness in Israel, were taken up into and fulfilled in the Gospel of the Son of man, and are henceforth to be realised even more happily and largely in the new society, which is gathering from every nation and tongue in the name of Jesus Christ, and under the final law of His Spirit.

Hence, when we review particular *commandments or ceremonies* of the law which may

seem of doubtful worth, we should seek to reproduce carefully the historical circumstances into which the precept or observance of the law may have been intended to fit. We must consider each law in its own historical setting. The student of comparative religion and sociology hardly needs to be reminded that the Mosaic legislation discloses some features which belong to archaic justice, which are familiar forms of rudimentary justice in the history of primitive culture generally. The law of retaliation, for example, against which so much objection is taken when it is found in the Bible, was a necessary custom among nomadic, pastoral, or even undeveloped agricultural people. It is simply one of the pioneer laws of civilisation, preceding necessarily the later, more settled social order. Personal retaliation, and certain rough-and-ready measures of compensation for injuries, were the only forms and methods of civil justice which were possible.

in the beginnings of social order. Many of the Mosaic laws, and some which occasion the greatest difficulty in our apprehension of them, were simply survivals, or modifications of ancient customs which were common among primitive people. The marriage laws of Moses, for example, bear traces of the influence of long prevalent customs, and were in some respects regulative and restrictive of existing usages, rather than creative of new rights and relations. They were good laws for the times. The divorce laws of Moses were improvements upon the worse customs which had been without law, and they were permitted for a time on account of the hardness of men's hearts. Any serious attempt to define and to regulate the marriage relationship was at that time a decided step forwards. Regulation rather than prohibition of an evil must often be the first step of practical reform. So, also, the laws concerning the release of *debtors*, the redistribution of land, and the

year of jubilee, had retrospective and regulative aspects and designs. One of the objects of such legislation was to protect and guard from further abuses existing customs, and admitted tenures of land.

Two distinct forces and tendencies are to be observed generally in legislation ; the one is the custom which makes law, the other is the legislative endeavour by which customary law is modified or extended. In the one aspect the law is judicial and regulative, in the other it is reformatory and progressive. Hence in estimating fully and fairly any particular enactment, we must distinguish between these two elements which co-exist in the laws ; we should seek to judge the particular legislation in question by its spirit and intent as well as by its necessary social contents, or actual conformity to custom. In this view of the matter we shall discover ample evidence of the moral growth and reformatory power of the Mosaic legislation in accordance with the

higher spirit and holy aim of the whole Old Testament Dispensation. Great improvements in the Hebrew commonwealth over primitive social customs became possible, as the true religion, especially in the prophetic teaching, gave moral tone to the life of the people, and enabled the laws consequently to restrain, or to put entirely away, evil and demoralising usages. The law of retaliation, for instance, which at first was the common, natural method of seeking justice—an archaic, rude law—is limited in the Deuteronomic code to the case of the false witness (Deut. xix. 16—21). Gradually the functions of civil life became more diversified, and consequently a finer equity among men was made possible. Instead of the sole authority of the chief, or the oral law of the priest, in the primitive community, we find in the later history of Israel the judges sitting at the gates of the city, and the still more thoroughly *organised* administration of the monarchy.

The punishment of stripes, which according to the old customs was to be inflicted only upon a slave, becomes a judicial penalty which may be visited by legal sentence upon one man who in a controversy has injured another. "Forty stripes he may give him : he may not exceed" (Deut. xxv. 1—3). A lawless measure is thus reduced to an exact legal penalty. Moreover, the priest becomes associated with a supreme judge (Deut. xvii. 9—12). The laws also concerning women show decided advancement. In Deuteronomy, the daughter is no longer regarded as belonging so entirely to her father, that she can be sold in marriage without possibility of manumission ; and the bondwoman ceases to be the absolute property of her master. According to the law in Deuteronomy xv. 12—17, a Hebrew woman has the right of a man to manumission after seven years. Ideally, indeed, or in absolute morality, these Mosaic laws concerning women still fall far short of perfection. Woman is

not yet made blessed under the Old Dispensation. The mother of Jesus was the blessed among women, and Christianity inherits and dispenses among women of all lands the final divine blessing of a holy and exalted womanhood. But, comparatively, the Mosaic laws concerning women were remarkably progressive laws for their times. They indicate the direction towards woman's true rights in the Christian family which Providence, in the laws of Moses, had begun to take. Similarly the laws concerning slaves and strangers, the weak, the helpless, and the oppressed, are so many signs of the way of mercy which God in Israel had chosen, and which He should patiently pursue until the end be reached in the perfect humanity of the Gospel.

The principles of criticism which we have applied to the morality of the Old Testament will be found helpful also when we read passages from the prophets and the Psalms *which seem to breathe a too revengeful and*

vindictive spirit. Such passages do not occur upon the same plane of revelation as that upon which St. Paul had gained his inspired conception of charity, and St. John his pure vision of God as love. The imprecatory Psalms are voices of prophets and kings who are struggling up from the confusion and darkness of human passions of justice and vengeance into the clear light of the perfect divine retributions. We can observe in them the higher leading of the Spirit, and hear the echo of the eternal justice.

These imprecatory Psalms attain sometimes a certain judicial and official significance, and are not to be regarded as the expression merely of an outraged and extravagant personal sense of justice. They are premonitory, though sometimes confused, utterances of the divine justice and its necessary retributions, which finds its perfect expression in the awful woes, pure as lightning-flashes from all earthliness, of Jesus'

Gospel. We may readily admit the human element in this growing expression and revelation of divine justice in the religious consciousness of Israel. Inspiration from the Lord of all history never anticipated its own work. No word has come from God out of time. The true divine revelation was content to be a partial and growing revelation. Relatively these imprecatory Psalms were good, and worked towards good; they also "made for righteousness." The Hebrew world needed strong, positive declarations of the awful power of justice, and God suffered His servants to affirm the claims of justice and the sovereign certainty of divine retributions in the world in language which the men to whom they were sent could understand. The same law of a practical and progressive revelation which we have observed in other portions of the Scriptures holds true through the Psalms of David; they were relatively *good, though not all absolutely perfect.*

Throughout the preceding discussion we have not encumbered the main line of our thought with critical references to questions concerning the origin of the Pentateuch, and the comparative age of different portions of the law and the prophets. Many of these questions, which have been lately thrown into the alembic of the so-called higher criticism, are now in process of solution, but are not yet fully settled. Our whole discussion, however, has been governed by the general presupposition, for which the historical evidence is now ample, that there was a development in the social life, religious thought, and worship of the Hebrews, and that in its main features this development may be traced in the record of the life of Israel which is contained in the Old Testament. It is probable that sociological considerations, or inferences drawn from a minute comparative study of the social conditions and customs of Israel, will enter more

fully than has as yet been the case into the critical study of the literary history, or chronology of the several books, of the Old Testament. But it is not necessary for us to enter into minute questions, or to determine the exact sequences of different portions of the Old Testament, for the purposes of our present discussion. It is enough for us to trace along its broad and unmistakable lines of development the morality of the Bible. Whether the Levitical law came as one body of law from Moses, as has until recently been generally believed, and in important precepts remained, as must in that case be supposed, latent and inoperative in the times of the great prophets ; or whether Deuteronomy and the priestly codex were further legal developments from the Mosaic roots of the Hebrew constitution, which in their time were made necessary, and were providentially *prepared* for the support of the later Judaism *when the age* of the prophets was fading, and

only its afterglow was left;—this is a question which we may leave to be determined by those Biblical critics who alone are qualified by minute learning to pronounce an opinion concerning the matter. We shall be glad to accept from their hands final sifted results; we may be excused from receiving their theories while the whole subject is upon the threshing-floor of the world's scholarship, and the chaff is still in process of separation from the wheat. For a fair and truthful estimate of the morality of the Old Testament it is sufficient to be able to distinguish the important epochs of the history of the true religion in Israel, to observe the moral adaptations and growth of revelation at distinctive times, and to follow the general movement and sweep of the whole sacred history as it flows on with resistless power, and as by some inner law, towards its Christian fulfilment.

We turn, in conclusion, from the specific points of questionable morals which have

been occupying our attention, and which in comparison with the whole contents of the Old Testament are few and unimportant, to lift up our eyes to the range and grandeur of this whole wonderful work of God in history. The evidence of God's special power and wisdom in it is clear and positive as a mountain range, when we consider the Old Testament as one connected whole, and in its sublime elevation above the plain of surrounding religions. As a whole, the Old Testament is unsurpassed, it is unapproached, in ancient history. The difference between the Chaldean Genesis and the Mosaic is as the difference between a noisome jungle, full of unclean things, and a clear mountain height. The Old Testament has sublime passages which rise far above the clouds and darkness of the pagan world into the glory of the heavens. The contrast between Isaiah's illumined prophecy and the *divinations* of the heathen soothsayers is as the *contrast* between so many flickering torches

and the dawn of the coming day. Upon many an exalted word of psalmist and prophet the morning light is shining ; already these lofty Hebrew Scriptures are glowing with the beams of the glory of the Lord which is to fill the whole earth. As one grand and inspired whole the morality of the Old Testament stands for a positive righteousness, a firm moral courage, a larger and sunnier humanity, a growing hope. That which is perfect was not yet come in the Old Testament, and there is an excellent glory before which, as the chief apostle of the New Dispensation has told us, the glory of the old covenant passes away. Jehovah went before His chosen people, in the Exodus, only in the cloud and the pillar of fire ; before the disciples God went in the form of man, as a Divine Person, a perfect character, exalted and sinless, yet near and most human, most loving and luminous, a glory full of grace and truth. The law was a schoolmaster to lead to Christ.

As a schoolmaster the law was faithful, just, and progressive—a schoolmaster whose method was practical, yet far-looking, and far-reaching ; whose course of instruction secured the largest and most enduring results in the education of mankind ; a schoolmaster whose measures with the pupil were simple, positive, and plain ; whose punishments were prompt, sometimes severe, and always efficacious ; a schoolmaster of whom fidelity to its great task required at times examples of stern mercy, but whose aim and hope from the beginning were the spiritual freedom of man and his final spiritual emancipation from its earlier law and tutelage. How well and how thoroughly the schoolmaster sent from God to Israel has done its work for the lasting good of mankind, modern history is the witness. In the most advanced and freest nations Hebraic elements are fused and welded with the Christian principles of the worth of the *individual man*, personal liberty, and human

brotherhood. In the moral development of the most civilised peoples in the ages to come, the first moral truths, which at great cost were taught by God in the Old Testament, will remain indestructible, and they will not need to be taught again at such expense of human suffering and divine patience. Both the law and the prophets shall be fulfilled in ever larger fulfilments in the Christian order and liberty, the Christian charity and peace, of the world for which He lived and died in whom are the wisdom and the power of God unto salvation.

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